

the night's busting open by glorious_spoon

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Summary:

People who disappear from Hawkins tend not to turn up in good condition if they turn up at all, so he can't really blame Nancy for the fact that she looks like she's about to implode.

There's a new monster in Hawkins, and it has Jonathan. It's up to Steve and Nancy to get him back.

the night's busting open

It's past midnight and his parents are out of town when Nancy pounds on his front door. Fortunately, since the first thing he does before going to answer is detour into the kitchen to grab a butcher knife, and that's not something he really wants to try explaining to his mom.

When he gets to the entry hall and sees her through the window, shivering on his front step in a torn blouse, he drops it on a side table and shoves a hand through his hair, feeling monster-adjacent nerves fading into an entirely different kind of nervousness. Because yeah, maybe he's had one or two (or ten, or twelve) guilty daydreams about Nancy turning up at his door in the dead of night and telling him that she's made a terrible mistake, that she wants him back...

The point is, they're asshole fantasies, and that's obviously not what's happening here, anyway. Nancy's face is streaked with tears and dirt and she's wearing a shirt that would be too thin for the cool spring night even if it wasn't shredded. She's shaking. Steve is going to have to beat the shit out of somebody, clearly, but that still doesn't answer the question of why she's *here*, instead of at Casa Byers. Unless it was *Jonathan*—

No. He dismisses the thought before it can even fully form. He and Jonathan have never really gotten around to being friends—there's too much between them for that, he thinks, mostly in the shape of Nancy—but he knows the guy better than that.

"Do you still have the nail bat?" Nancy asks immediately, when he pulls the door open.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," Steve says after a long moment, although she clearly isn't. Why is this his life? "Shit. Yeah, I still have it. Come in. What happened?"

"Sorry," Nancy says, and swipes at her face with her sleeve as she steps past him into the foyer. It doesn't do much more than smear the grime around. "God, Steve, I'm so sorry, I just... your house was closest and I didn't know where else to go—"

"Where's Byers?" Steve asks, and immediately wishes he hadn't. Nancy's eyes well up with tears again, and she wipes at them angrily, and Jesus Christ, is Jonathan *dead*? The thought feels like an unexpected fist to the gut.

"I don't know," Nancy says. "I don't *know*, okay, something took him. And we need to get him back."

Well, fuck.

Nancy doesn't pace; she never has. Right now Steve kind of wishes she would. Watching her sit there on the couch, clutching her kneecaps with both hands and practically vibrating with tension, is starting to give him a sympathy headache.

And he's thinking about that so he doesn't have to think about the fact that Jonathan is missing. Taken. Whatever. People who disappear from Hawkins tend not to turn up in good condition if they turn up at all, so he can't really blame Nancy for the fact that she looks like she's about to implode.

"So was it one of those, what did they call them, demo-dogs?" he asks as he laces up a pair of hiking boots. If it was, Jonathan is probably already...

But, no. Those things didn't *take* anybody, last time. If one of them caught up to you, you were monster dog chow on the spot.

"No," Nancy says. Her foot is jittering on the floor, and she's watching him like she's considering pulling out the gun he just knows she's carrying to see if that'll make him go faster. The fact that it wouldn't be the first time she's ever pointed a gun in his face probably says something about their relationship. "It was something else. Something new."

"Great," Steve mutters. He grabs his jacket off the coat stand, hesitates, then grabs the hooded sweatshirt that's been hanging up there for literally years; the last time it fit him was probably middle school. "Here."

Nancy stares at him. “What?”

“Take the sweatshirt, Nancy, it’s cold out, okay? And your shirt’s falling apart.”

“Oh, I...” She glances down at her mangled shirt like she’s just now noticed it, then takes the sweatshirt from him and pulls it on, zips it up to her chin. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” Steve says, and resolutely turns away before he can think about how much it still warms him, on some primal level, to see her wearing his clothes. Jonathan is *missing*, for fuck’s sake. “You walked here?”

“From the quarry. Jonathan’s keys were in his pocket.”

That’s at least two miles from here. “We can take my car; the bat’s in the trunk anyway. What were you guys doing up there?”

Nancy doesn’t answer. When he looks back at her, she’s blushing.

Oh.

Well, sure. Romantic view, privacy, what the hell *else* would they be doing together up at the quarry? He’s gotten so used to thinking of everything involving Jonathan Byers as a life-or-death, end of the world scenario that he somehow managed to forget for five minutes that Jonathan is Nancy’s boyfriend now, which means that of course they’re going to go up in the woods to fuck on a blanket under the stars, and cuddle, maybe share a stolen beer or two, and whisper secret hopes and dreams to each other—

“Never mind,” Steve mutters. “Let’s go.”

“Steve—”

He really does not have the emotional maturity to deal with this right now. “It’s fine, Nance. Seriously. None of my business. Let’s go.”

Normally, she wouldn’t let it drop like that; Nancy’s never met an argument she didn’t like. But for a change, the urgency of the situation works in his favor; she firms her jaw and nods, and follows

him out to the car without another word.

Jonathan's car is parked about twenty yards back from the quarry edge under a drooping willow tree that's wreathed in the pale green leaves of early spring. The back doors are open, and a blanket is crumpled on a flat stretch of new grass. No beer cans, because of course Jonathan is not Steve, but his camera is still there, the lens cap off, the strap tangled. Steve wonders if he was taking pictures of Nancy in the cool moonlight, and then immediately squashes that line of thinking. *Not helpful, Harrington.*

The soft sod is churned with dirt, grass torn up; it looks like the fifty-yard line at the end of a game. He's not any kind of tracker, but even he can see that there are drag marks heading into the thick tangle of trees.

"I followed as long as I could," Nancy says quietly, her eyes on the marks. Her face is white in the thin beam of his flashlight. "But I didn't have a flashlight, and I should have—"

"Hey," Steve says, and puts his hand on her shoulder, squeezes gently. She's warm through the thick sweatshirt, always stronger than she looks. Trembling slightly beneath his fingers, although he wouldn't be able to tell just by looking. Nancy's always been good at hiding things like that. "We'll find him, okay?"

She presses her lips together and nods, and he lets his hand drop. He shoulders the nail bat, and Nancy draws her gun, and side by side they walk into the dark woods.

It's pitch black beneath the branches, but with the light of the flashlight, the trail is surprisingly easy to follow. There are snapped branches, churned up dirt. Dark splashes of something that he first takes for blood. A *lot* of it, too, which makes something cold and fearful knot itself into the back of his throat, but when he kneels to investigate, it's some kind of ichor, blackish and foul-smelling, sticky as tar.

"You didn't see what it was?" he asks in a low voice, standing. The darkness of the woods feels oppressive, the back of his neck prickling.

“Not really. It was fast. Big.” Nancy shudders. “It had— too many legs. I shot at it, but that didn’t slow it down any.”

“Great,” Steve mutters. He wipes his hand on his jeans, raises the flashlight, and they continue on.

The further they go, the more ichor there is. Bark is skinned off of the trees in strips, and the path zigzags wildly; it looks like Nancy might have actually done the thing some damage after all when she shot it. Still no sign of Jonathan, though, not even a scrap of cloth. No blood, though. At least there’s that.

“Look,” Nancy whispers, after about fifteen minutes, and he stops. There’s a loop of some thick, silvery substance dangling from a tree branch just above their heads, glistening slightly in the white beam of his flashlight. Steve pokes at it cautiously with the nail bat, and it sticks. He yanks it loose, but now he can see that there’s more of the stuff tangled up in the high branches above their heads, thick torn ropes of it dangling in the still air. It looks like... like a net, or like it used to be a net before something very large blundered through it and ripped it to shreds like a big fish in a too-small snare. Something about the shape pricks familiarly at his memory.

Not a net. A *web*.

Shit.

“Does.” He clears his throat. He’s not panicking, no sir. “Does this look like a really big spiderweb to you?”

“No,” Nancy says immediately, but her eyes are round and nervous. Good. At least he’s not the only one.

“You said the thing— whatever it was— you said it had too many legs.”

He is *not* panicking.

Nancy spins slowly in place, face upturned to look at the... ropes. Yeah. He’ll call them ropes, for now. Sticky ropes, dangling from the tree. The flashlight is shaking a little in his hand, and at first he thinks that’s all it is, the wavering uncertain beam and the dark tree

branches, shadows jittering at the edges of the light.

Nancy opens her mouth, but before she can speak, one of the shadows resolves itself into something dark and hairy and *huge* that drops out of the tree above their heads.

Steve lets out an unmanly yelp that he'll deny to his dying day, and lunges toward Nancy, nail bat at the ready, as she rolls away from the downward stab of some giant... stinger, or something. It buries itself a good foot into the soft forest loam before lifting to stab at her again, but by then Steve is there. He swings with all his might, feels the wet meaty *thunk* as the bat makes contact with the monster's flank. There's an inhuman, ear-splitting shriek. He jerks the bat loose and winds up to swing again, and something hard— a leg? a pincer? — strikes him from the side, knocking him back into a tree trunk with punishing force. The nail bat rolls away from his fingers.

He shakes his head, clearing the spots from his vision. The flashlight is rolling away from him, spinning crazily, illuminating the scene in nightmarish flashes of light and shadow. The monster— Jesus fuck, it is a spider, if spiders came in elephant size— rears up above Nancy, easily four times her height, long bristled legs brushing the underside of the highest branches.

Jesus christ, jesus *fucking* christ— he scrabbles desperately in the dark soil, searching for the bat by feel, panic roiling in the pit of his stomach— and then there's the sharp report of a gun.

Another shot. The thing shrieks. The flashlight rolls to a stop against a tree root, and now Steve can see Nancy stepping back, firming her stance, her face blank with concentration, pistol in her hands. She fires three more times in rapid succession, then dives out of the way as the monster's legs begin to fold, as it collapses suddenly, heavily, in the soft dirt.

There's an echoing silence, during which Steve feels like he couldn't move if his life depended on it. Then a rustle, soft quick footsteps, and Nancy says, in a voice that sounds like it's skirting panic, "Steve, are you okay? *Steve?*"

"Shit, what the fuck," Steve manages, and then, "I'm okay." It's true.

Mostly. His head hurts where he cracked against the tree, but he's pretty sure he's not concussed.

Nancy reaches down to pull him up, then wraps both arms around him, squeezing tightly. He can feel the gun, still in her hand, bump against his hip as he carefully hugs her back. The familiar smell of her shampoo is cut through with the sharp bite of gunpowder like spent fireworks, and some foully sweet stink that has to be the monster itself.

It's a lot longer than he was expecting before Nancy takes a deep breath, lets it out, and releases him. "Okay. We're okay."

"Yeah, we're okay," Steve says after a moment, letting his arms drop. He picks his way over to the flashlight and picks it up, shines it at the dead monster. Dozens of eyes glitter dully, and a pale string of slime or mucus or something is dangling from one long fang. Long, bristled legs as thick around as saplings are splayed out on the forest floor. Black blood oozes thickly from its wounds. "Jesus. What the hell is this thing? Is this what took Jonathan?"

God, he hopes so. Otherwise, there's *another* monster lurking around in the woods, and he's just... really not up for dealing with that.

"I think so," Nancy says. "Or something like it, anyway."

There's a brittle sound to her voice that Steve doesn't need an explanation for. He can feel the same unease churning sickly in his gut: if this thing took Jonathan, then *where the hell is he?*

He eyes the drooling fangs again, each one as long as his forearm and twice as thick. The maw between them is easily big enough to swallow a person whole.

Nancy begins picking her way around the edge of the clearing, peering into the dark underbrush. Before he can steel himself to suggest the horrible thing that he's thinking (*cut it open, we should cut it open and see if he's inside*) she calls, "Steve! Shine that over here."

He retrieved the nail bat from where it had wedged itself under a root and lifts the flashlight. Nancy is bending over something in the

tangled thicket. Steve braces himself, but when he approaches, it's not Jonathan's mangled body she's found. He's not sure what it is, actually. Oblong, probably five or six feet long, it resembles nothing so much as an oversized, misshapen ball of yarn. It's the same pearly white color as the spiderwebs, and it glistens faintly in the light.

"Is that..."

"Spider silk," Nancy says. "They wrap up insects."

"I'm guessing that's not an insect." It's also not moving.

"No." He can't read her voice. There's something cold and distant and blank about it. She runs her hands over the surface of the cocoon, pulling at the fibers, but even he can see that she's going to get nowhere barehanded. "Do you have a pocket knife?"

"Yeah. Let me..." He pulls it out, opens it.

"I'll do it," Nancy says, and holds out her hand. Steve considers arguing, then looks at the hard set of her jaw and her wet, angry eyes and hands the knife over without a word.

The stuff doesn't look that thick, but it clearly doesn't want to come apart. Nancy is reduced to hacking at it in short order, clawing at it with her fingers until it finally parts to reveal a stretch of glossy tan fur, streaked with blood. Nancy sits back on her heels, letting out an explosive breath.

"A deer," Steve says. He's not sure whether or not he should be relieved. There's a deep puncture mark in the animal's throat, and its dark eyes are glazed and dull in death.

"There are more," Nancy says, pointing, and Steve lifts the flashlight to see two more silk-wrapped cocoons nestled in the flattened grass.

"I can—" he starts, and sees her knuckles whiten around the handle of the knife. "You know what, this ought to work," he says instead, hefting the bat. The nails are long and sharp, still dripping with monster gore. They'll probably cut through spider silk. "You take one, I'll take the other?"

He waits for her nod before setting the flashlight down so they can both sort of see and shoving into the underbrush to crouch beside one of the cocoons.

The nails are sharp, but it quickly becomes clear that they're not especially well-suited to cutting. It's several long, frustrating moments of scrabbling before he manages to pull a clump of threads loose. He sets the bat aside and tears at them with his fingers, the fibers biting into his skin. There's something in there—

"Another deer," Nancy says from behind him, but Steve barely hears her, because the strands are parting beneath his fingers, and beneath them he can see pale skin, a flash of red checkered flannel.

"Nancy, it's him." Jesus christ. All he can see is the edge of a sleeve, one pale hand with long fingers and cracked nails, horribly still and cold to the touch. Everything else is still swathed in tough, sticky spider silk. Jesus *christ*. "It's Jonathan, give me the knife, it's him."

Nancy swears, low and vehement, and he can hear her crashing through the underbrush toward him, but he doesn't look up until she shoves the knife into his hand and falls to her knees beside him, tearing at the fibers with her bare hands. He hacks at the cocoon, claws at it with his fingers, frantically impatient; he can hear his heart pounding in his ears but he doesn't think he actually breathes again until he pulls aside the last of the silk to see Jonathan's face.

It's slack and bloodless, cold to the touch. His lips are parted, his eyebrows like dark slashes above the thin bruised shells of his eyelids. He doesn't respond when Steve slaps his cheek gently.

"Jonathan." There's something wrong with his voice; it sounds thin and tight, like it belongs to somebody else. "Shit, Jonathan. Come on, buddy, wake up."

"Jonathan," Nancy says, and then her hand is on Steve's shoulder, shoving him roughly out of the way. She presses two slim fingers to Jonathan's throat. The silence seems to stretch out for an age before she turns her tear-stained face to Steve and says, "He's alive."

Steve feels the air leave his lungs like he's been punched, leaving an

awful, shaky relief in its wake. Alive. He's alive. "You're sure."

"I'm sure." Nancy wipes her face on her sleeve and then adds, suddenly businesslike, "Come on, help me get the rest of this off of him. We should get out of here."

"No arguments here," Steve says, and reaches for the knife again.

It takes a long time to peel the rest of the cocoon off of Jonathan, and Steve's hands are abraded and raw by the time they finally manage it. When Nancy wipes her hands on his sweatshirt, they leave smears of blood behind.

Jonathan doesn't wake up, doesn't even twitch, the whole time. Steve pauses at least three times to check his pulse, to be briefly reassured by the faint, steady flutter beneath his cool, slack throat. He's breathing shallowly, so he had to be getting some kind of airflow inside that thing. It looks like the stinger got him in the side, but it's not that deep and it's already stopped bleeding. He'll be okay. He'll be fine.

"How are we going to get him out of here?" Nancy asks, when they're done.

"Well." Steve looks back at the grotesque bulk of the dead monster. "I guess one of us could go find a payphone and call the cops."

Great idea if they get Hopper, shitty idea if they get literally anybody else. Also, that leaves the other one here alone with an unconscious Jonathan and, potentially, more giant flesh-eating spiders. Nancy just gives him a look.

"Or I could carry him."

"Can you?"

"Yeah," Steve says, with more confidence than he really feels. He was in Boy Scouts. He knows how to do a fireman's carry. And if nothing else, the combined forces of masculine ego and the sheer pants-shitting terror of what will happen if they're all still here when another one of those things comes back should do the trick. Besides, what the hell other choice do they have? Nancy weighs about a

hundred pounds soaking wet, it's not like she's going to be able to haul Jonathan's unconscious body out of here, and it's pretty clear that getting her to go for help alone is a non-starter.

"Okay," Nancy says dubiously, but he can tell her thoughts are running along the same lines; she doesn't argue. She holds the flashlight under her arm for a moment to reload her gun in quick, competent motions, shoves the empty magazine in her purse and the gun in her pocket, and holds out her hand. "Give me the bat. I'll carry that."

"Gonna protect us?" Steve asks, and he means it to come out teasing, but the thing is, of the three of them, Nancy has always been the fighter. He'll trust her to take on giant spiders more than he trusts himself.

She rolls her eyes at him, a faint smile quirking her lips, and for a moment it's like nothing between them has even changed, like she's still his Nancy, like if he went to her now and put his arms around her, she'd stand up on her toes to kiss him, quick and sweet, like she has a thousand times.

Bullshit. Of course it's bullshit, and he doesn't try it. Instead, he crouches beside Jonathan and pulls his limp arm over his shoulder, settles his weight across his shoulders in a fireman's carry, and stands with a grunt. For such a lanky guy, Jonathan is pretty goddamn heavy. He's also unnervingly boneless and cold to the touch, but with his head just a few inches away, at least Steve can hear him breathing.

"Okay?" Nancy asks.

Steve shifts, trying to settle Jonathan's weight more evenly, then stops when he feels him start to slip. Last thing the guy needs right now is for Steve to drop him head-first on a tree root. "Yeah. I got him."

"Alright." She shoulders the nail bat. "Let's go. Let me know if you need a break, though, okay?"

"Sure," Steve lies, and follows her out onto the wreckage of the path.

Back at the quarry, they load Jonathan into the back of his car, since it's about three times the size of Steve's. His head clunks off the window crank in a way that makes Steve wince, but he doesn't stir. Nancy checks his pulse for approximately the tenth time tonight, then digs in his pockets for a moment before coming up with the keys.

"We should take him to the hospital," she says.

"And tell them what, that he almost became a midnight snack for some giant fucking spider monster? Come on." She's probably right, though. "Look, let's head back to my place, we can call the Chief, see what he thinks. It's on the way anyway."

Nancy wavers, her hand resting on Jonathan's ankle. The leg of his jeans is rucked up slightly, showing a threadbare gray sock and a few inches of skinny ankle. There's something almost unbearably vulnerable about it, about the tangled fall of his too-long hair, the smear of blood on the side of his faded Black Flag t-shirt, where the thing's stinger left a divot just above his left hip, his long, pale artist's hands splayed limply against the worn upholstery. His lips are parted, his breath coming softly.

Jonathan would never want to be seen like this. Not by Steve, at least.

Nancy is close enough that he can almost feel the warmth of her in the cool night air, and Steve backs away before he can do something stupid like put his arms around her. "It's up to you," he says. "We can go to the hospital right now, if you want."

"No," she sighs, and curls her fingers around Jonathan's ankle. It's casually intimate in a way that kicks at some part of Steve that's still a little tender. He looks away. "No, you're right. We can call the Chief from your house. If he hasn't woken up by then, we'll take him to the ER."

Decree issued, she gently moves Jonathan's leg out of the way to close the door and slides into the front seat.

"Okay," Steve says, like he actually has any say in this. He gestures at

the blanket still tangled in the grass behind the back tire, the battered thermos, Jonathan's camera, all the detritus of their ruined date. "Should we bring any of this?"

"Leave it," Nancy says absently. She's still turned in her seat so that she can watch Jonathan, like she's afraid he might evaporate before her eyes. "We can come back. I want to get out of here before another one of those things comes back."

It's hard to argue with that. Still, Steve bends down to scoop up the camera and lens cap as he passes. He spent a lot of money on that thing. And Jonathan doesn't need another busted camera to top off what has clearly already been a really shitty night.

Jonathan is starting to stir by the time they make it back to Steve's house, and Nancy unbuckles her seatbelt and clamors into the back as he's maneuvering that giant old boat of a car into the driveway, kneeing him in the arm hard enough that he almost drives into the decorative stone retaining wall, thus incurring his dad's wrath until the end of time. He can hear her murmuring, too low to make out the words, and then, with a bolt of relief, the low, confused mumble of Jonathan's reply.

"He's awake," Nancy says unnecessarily, as Steve puts the car in park.

"Yeah, I see that." He twists in his seat to look at Jonathan. "How're you doing back there, man?"

"Uh," Jonathan says, blinking myopically at Steve. "Steve?"

"Yeah, that's me. Do you need a hospital?" He looks at Nancy. "Does he need a hospital?"

She's not paying attention to him. "Jonathan, what do you remember?"

"I—" Jonathan lifts his hands, holds them up, trembling, before his face like they belong to someone else. They're still laced with faint, sticky strands of spider silk. Softly, after a long moment, he murmurs, "What the *fuck*."

“Yeah,” Steve says, and Jonathan jumps like he forgot Steve was there. “My thoughts exactly. Nancy— hospital, yes or no?”

She looks at him, then at Jonathan, twisting her hands indecisively in her lap. Finally, she says, “Let’s just get him inside, okay?”

“Jonathan?”

Jonathan hesitates for several moments, then says somewhat more clearly, “Yeah. I’m fine. Mom can’t afford an ER bill anyway, not after everythin’ with Will.”

And that... was honestly not something that had occurred to Steve, but he’s pretty sure anything he says in response will be the wrong thing, and Jonathan is levering himself upright now, cautious and shaky as an old man, so he’s probably fine. Steve cuts the engine, gets out of the car, and hurriedly circles around to the backseat before Jonathan can get the genius idea to try to walk up to the house by himself and fall flat on his dumb pretty face.

It actually might be easier to carry him, given the way he keeps getting tangled up in his own legs and the fact that probably three-quarters of his weight is resting on Steve anyway, but they make it up the stairs and into the living room without incident. Jonathan collapses onto the couch like a puppet whose strings have been cut, his head lolling back and his eyes dazed. Nancy perches on the cushion next to him, takes his hands and chafes them between hers. When she glances up at Steve, her eyes are worried.

Yeah, this might not have been the best idea.

“Jonathan?” he asks.

“I’m okay,” Jonathan says, his eyes sliding shut. He opens them again with a visible effort.

Steve has some serious doubts about whether or not that’s true, but it’s not really his call. And anyway, he’s had enough experience looking after various drunken idiots after parties; this can’t be that different, can it?

Shit. He’s in so far over his head. “I’ll go call the Chief.”

"An' my mom," Jonathan mumbles. His head tilts down against Nancy's shoulder. "Don' want her t' worry."

"Nance?"

"I'll take care of him," she says, and her eyes are wide and worried but her voice is firm. "Go call Hopper and Mrs. Byers."

"Okay, okay," Steve says, and goes.

"A giant *spider*?" Hopper asks, sounding pretty goddamn skeptical for a guy who has fought off interdimensional face-eating monsters on at least two occasions that Steve knows of.

"That's what it looked like. Go check it out if you don't believe me."

"You're sure?"

"No, I'm not sure, man, but it had a shitload of legs and eyes and it was about twenty feet tall, and we had to cut Byers out of a fucking cocoon where it had stashed him, so, yeah, I'm going with *giant spider* for now, okay?"

There's a long silence at the other end of the line, and then something that sounds suspiciously like a snort. "How is he?"

"Stoned out of his mind, but I... think he'll be okay? He said he didn't want a hospital. I need to call his mom, too..."

"I'll call Joyce," Hopper says, to Steve's deep relief. "You take care of Jonathan. Call me if anything changes, and he gets worse, for the love of Christ, call a goddamn ambulance. I don't care what he says. I'll look into this. Giant spiders, Jesus fucking Christ," he adds in an undertone, and hangs up.

Steve stares at the phone in his hand for a long moment, then places it gingerly back in the cradle and goes back into the living room.

Jonathan is sprawled back against the couch cushions with his eyes closed, Nancy tucked up against his side, her head resting on his chest. She uncurls when she sees Steve, pushes her hair out of her

face, then grimaces when filaments of sticky webbing come off on her hand. “Ugh, gross. He’s okay, I think. Just sleeping.”

“I can stay with him if you want to take a shower,” Steve offers. “I have some sweatpants and stuff, too, there’s a bathroom upstairs—”

“I know,” Nancy says, smiling slightly, and Steve snaps his mouth shut. Of fucking course she knows. She’s showered there dozens of times, staying over when his parents were out of town. “Are you sure you don’t mind?”

“I’m sure,” Steve says, and swallows down everything else that wants to come out of his mouth. “I’ll grab some clean clothes and leave them on the sink for you.”

“Thanks,” Nancy says, and then, her eyes softening, “Steve—”

“Yeah, so I’ll just, uh—” Steve hooks a thumb over his shoulder, and escapes before she can say anything else.

Once Nancy is safely upstairs, he sinks down on the couch next to Jonathan and scrubs his hands over his face. The clock on the side table reads 3:18, and exhaustion is dragging at him like a weight. Faintly, he can hear the shower kick on. He pushes the heels of his hands into his eyes until white spots bloom in his field of vision, trying not to think of Nancy upstairs in his bathroom, naked and wreathed in billowing steam. Unsuccessfully.

“Shit,” he mutters, dropping his hands into his lap. Beside him on the couch, Jonathan is breathing slow and deep, snoring slightly on the inhales, clearly and evidently *not dead*, but it’s been a pretty fucked up night, so Steve can’t quite stop himself from reaching out, pressing his fingers to Jonathan’s throat to feel his pulse thrumming steadily there. His skin is warm now, still faintly sticky to the touch. His hair brushes the back of Steve’s knuckles. Without really thinking what he’s doing, he slides his fingers up into it, pushing it back out of Jonathan’s face. Even with monster spiderweb residue in it, it’s surprisingly soft. Jonathan stirs, turns blindly into his touch.

“Nancy?” he says thickly.

Steve snatches his hand back like it just caught fire. He clears his throat. "No, buddy. It's Steve."

A furrow appears between Jonathan's brows, and he opens his eyes. "Steve? Where's Nancy?"

"She's here. In the shower. She's fine." Steve shoves a hand through his hair, feeling grit and grease beneath his fingers. He has to look like an unholy mess right now, but it's not like either Nancy or Jonathan is going to give a shit about that. "Jesus. You scared the shit out of both of us, you know that?"

"Sorry," Jonathan says, but he still looks baffled. "Where are we?"

"My place." Steve waves a hand vaguely at the living room. "You don't remember?"

"Not really." Jonathan starts to sit up, then stops, wincing, and puts a hand to his side. "Ow."

"Yeah, you were pretty out of it." Steve makes a face when Jonathan's fingers come away red. "Shit, I'm sorry. I should have got, like, some bandages or something. Iodine. That thing got you pretty good."

"It's okay," Jonathan says, and wipes his fingers on his jeans, sitting up more carefully. Gingerly, he pulls his t-shirt up to inspect the wound, which has started sluggishly oozing blood again. "I'm bleeding on your parents' couch, though."

"To hell with the fucking couch," Steve says, surprising himself with his vehemence. Jonathan jerks his head up to stare at him, wide-eyed. "You could have died."

Incredibly, Jonathan breathes out a laugh at that. "Yeah. I guess it was kind of my turn, though."

"Your *turn*?" Steve asks, astonished and sharp. His heart is pounding, suddenly, and he feels on edge, almost angry. Jonathan could have *died*, it's not a fucking joke, even if Jonathan is the one laughing at it. "You really are out of your goddamn mind, Byers."

“So I’ve heard,” Jonathan says, dry and still somehow amused. “What’s it to you?”

Steve opens his mouth, then shuts it again. “I’m going to go get some bandages,” he manages finally. “Try not to bleed out in the meantime, okay?”

With that, he spins on his heel and leaves the room, feeling like he’s just lost an argument he didn’t even notice he was having.

There’s a first-aid kit in the downstairs bathroom, fortunately, since he’s pretty sure Nancy wouldn’t appreciate him barging in on her right now. When they were still dating—

Nope. Not going there.

Anyway, there are bandages and antiseptic and cotton balls, and he grabs all of it, brings it back into the living room. Jonathan is standing, still visibly unsteady on his feet, surveying his surroundings with an unreadable expression. For a moment, Steve wonders what it looks like through his eyes: the tasteful beige-and gray-striped couch (now liberally spotted with blood), the chintz curtains, the chandelier overhead dripping crystals to reflect shards of light in the gilded mirror above the fireplace. Jonathan and his family don’t have a lot of money, he knows. Every time he’s been inside their house, there’s been some kind of serious crazy going down, but even without the demented Christmas decorations or reams of paper taped to the walls, it would be... small. Plain. Nothing like this.

Steve clears his throat, feeling suddenly awkward for no good reason that he can think of. “Uh, I have bandages and stuff.”

Jonathan looks up at him, then at the box and the bottle of iodine in his hands, then finally nods. “Okay. Thanks.”

“Do need help, or...?”

“I can...” Jonathan lifts his hands. They’re trembling visibly, enough that Steve can tell from across the room. He stares at them for a moment, then lets them drop. His mouth slants into a lopsided, rueful smile. “Actually, yeah, I could probably use some help. Thanks.”

“Hey, no problem, man. Look, just sit down on the couch— it’s already covered in blood, seriously, just sit down before you fall down, okay?”

He gets Jonathan situated on the couch, then reaches for the cotton balls and iodine, but Jonathan peers at the bottle and shakes his head, putting out a shaky hand to stop him. “That’s totally going to wreck my shirt.”

“*That’s* what you’re worried about right now?” Steve asks, amazed.

“I like this shirt,” Jonathan says stubbornly, and twists away from Steve, gingerly pulling the t-shirt up and over his head. He deposits it on the coffee table.

“It’s already got blood on it,” Steve points out.

“I know how to wash blood out. Iodine is a different story.”

“That’s not ominous or anything.”

Jonathan grins a little at that, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees so that Steve can reach the wound. He’s pale under his clothes, more muscular than Steve would have expected if he’d ever thought about it. Which he hasn’t.

He kneels down beside the couch and soaks the cotton ball with iodine, dabbing gingerly at the puncture wound above Jonathan’s hip. It *has* to hurt, and Jonathan’s breathing is slow and deliberate, his lips pressed together until they’re white at the edges, but he doesn’t make a sound.

“Okay?” Steve asks quietly, reaching for another cotton ball and setting the blood-and-iodine-soaked one down on the coffee table. His mom’s already going to kill him for the couch, might as well go the whole hog.

“Yeah. It’s fine.”

It’s pretty much stopped bleeding now, and Steve can see how deep it is— at least an inch, maybe more, raw and starting to bruise around the edges. Yeah, that has to hurt like hell. “I think this might need

stitches.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Oh, yeah? Where’d you get your medical degree, huh?”

Jonathan’s belly quakes under Steve’s fingers as he laughs softly. “I’ve patched myself up a lot of times. Will, too. Just put a bandage over it, it’ll be fine.”

“If you get gangrene or something, I’m not taking the blame for it,” Steve mutters, but he peels the wrapper off of a large, square bandage and lays it over the injury, smoothing down the adhesive edges as gently as he can. “There. Good?”

“Yeah,” Jonathan says quietly. “Thanks.”

“No problem,” Steve says. Jonathan is looking down at him, his hair falling into his face, completely disheveled. There’s still a slight smile curled into the corners of his mouth, but his eyes are... intent. Focused.

Steve swallows. His fingers are still resting on Jonathan’s hip; he can feel the shape of the bone there. Upstairs, the shower cuts off, and there’s a heavy, expectant stillness in the air. He takes a slow breath, feeling something shivery and strange uncurling in the pit of his stomach—

—and the shrill sound of the telephone shatters the silence. Jonathan startles, and Steve jerks his hand away, over-balances, and lands on his ass on the cream-colored carpet.

“Shit,” he says, stupidly, “I should get that.”

He levers himself up using the coffee table and crosses the room to answer without meeting Jonathan’s eyes. “Harrington residence.”

“Let me talk to my boy.” The voice is a woman’s, sharp and on-edge. It takes Steve a moment to recognize it.

“Um. Mrs. Byers?”

"Is Jonathan there?" she asks, and then, before he can answer, "let me talk to him. Now."

"Uh," Steve says, turning back toward Jonathan. "It's for you. It's your mom."

Jonathan levers himself up before Steve can offer to bring the whole phone over to him, crosses the room with the kind of slow, careful, slightly unbalanced gait that Steve usually associates with drunk people at end of house parties. He braces himself not-so-subtly against the door frame and takes the phone from Steve. "Hi, Mom."

Tinnily, he can hear Mrs. Byers speaking over the phone, but he can't quite make out the words. Jonathan nods, then says, "Seriously, Mom, I'm okay. No, really. I'm fine. Steve and Nancy... yeah, Steve Harrington."

Steve makes a face and looks away just as Nancy slips into the room, barefoot and silent on the soft carpet. She's wearing his track & field t-shirt, which is huge and shapeless on her. His too-long sweatpants are rolled up several times around her ankles, her wet hair is loose around her shoulders, and she's still incredibly, achingly beautiful.

She tilts her head at Jonathan, mouths, *how is he?*

Steve shrugs. Into the phone, Jonathan says, "Mom, no. *Mom*. Seriously, don't— I'm okay. Really, I'm okay. I'll be fine here, you don't have to leave work, it's *fine*." He listens for a moment. "Yeah. Yeah, I promise. I love you too. Bye."

He hangs up the phone and drops his head against the door frame for a long moment before looking at Steve. "So, I kind of told my mom I'd stay here."

"Well, yeah," Steve says, without thinking. "You think I'm gonna let you drive home like this? You can't even walk in a straight line."

"I could drive," Jonathan says, jutting his chin out stubbornly.

"Or you could stay here, wash the monster slime off of you, get some sleep, and *not* crash your car into the nearest telephone pole," Steve says. "Just as, like, an alternate suggestion."

Jonathan eyes him. "Are your parents going to be okay with that?"

"My parents are in San Diego, man," Steve says. "What they don't know won't hurt them. Come on. I'll grab you some clean clothes, Nancy can show you where the bathroom is."

Nancy is eyeing him too, with that uncomfortably perceptive look that she always used to wear when she was seeing right through all of his bullshit, but after a long moment, she just nods and holds out a hand to Jonathan. "Come on, it's right up here."

"You guys should take my room," Steve says, after Nancy has helped Jonathan into the shower. They're both leaning on the hallway outside the bathroom door; neither of them has admitted that they're listening for the sound of Jonathan collapsing in the shower, but he's pretty sure they're both thinking it.

"What?"

"You and Jonathan. You should take my room. The bed in the spare room is a single, I can take that."

That perceptive look is back. "Are you going to be okay with that?"

Steve shrugs, deliberately casual. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Nancy gives him a long look, eyebrows raised, the kind of look that she'd give him, back in the day, before kissing him and telling him he was an idiot, but in the end she just shakes her head and says, "Okay. If you're sure."

"I'm sure," Steve says, and mercifully, she doesn't push it.

On the other side of the door, the shower shuts off, and they wait in the hallway together until Jonathan comes back out again. His wet hair is slicked back from his face, and he's wearing another one of Steve's t-shirts (Hawkins Wildcats, in this case), and a pair of dark blue sweatpants, his own grimy clothes tucked under his arm.

So it turns out that seeing Jonathan in his clothes hits him low and hot in the belly in the exact same way that seeing Nancy does, even

though they fit Jonathan a hell of a lot better. Jesus Christ.

In lieu of examining *that* in any detail, Steve waves Jonathan and Nancy in the direction of his bedroom and escapes into the shower before either of them can ask why he's blushing.

Of course, the problem with his precipitous escape is that when he gets out of the shower, he doesn't have any goddamn clothes that aren't covered in dirt and blood and giant spider gore. Shit.

He swipes at the fogged up mirror to inspect his reflection. It looks normal. It does not look like the reflection of a guy who has just discovered that he'd really, really like to kiss Jonathan Byers on the mouth.

This has to be some kind of adrenaline thing. Or a sleep deprivation thing. He just needs to get some goddamn sleep, and he'll stop wondering what it would be like to press his mouth to the crooked line of Jonathan's smile and feel it soften. To strip him out of those baggy, unfashionable clothes he insists on wearing all the time and—

Jesus *christ*.

He swipes a hand, damp with condensation, over his face and wraps a towel around his waist. Then he takes a deep breath and goes to see about getting some clean clothes.

The door to his room is shut, and he raps on it lightly before pushing it open, half wondering if he's going to catch them going at it in his bed, but of course they're not. They're curled together under the comforter, Nancy tucked under the curve of Jonathan's arm, two sets of dark hair spilling across his pillows. For a moment, he thinks they're both asleep, but then Nancy opens her eyes to squint at him. "Steve?"

"Sorry," Steve says quietly, but of course now Jonathan is stirring too, lifting his head to look at him. "Just gotta grab some clean clothes, and I'll be out of your hair."

Jonathan hums sleepily, but doesn't take his eyes off of Steve as he

opens his dresser drawers and grabs a t-shirt and a pair of sweats at random.

“So I’ll just, uh—” He hooks a thumb over his shoulder, in the direction of the hallway and the spare room, with its clean, cold, empty bed. “I’ll be right out there in the other room. If you need me.”

Yeah. Like *that’s* likely.

Nancy and Jonathan exchange a long glance, so full of meaning that Steve half-wonders if they’ve figured out how to communicate telepathically. Hey, he’s seen weirder things in his life. He’s seen weirder things in the past three hours, for that matter.

“Steve, don’t be an idiot,” Nancy says finally, and reaches across Jonathan to flip the edge of the blanket up. “Come here.”

“What?”

“You heard her,” Jonathan says. His voice is challenging, but there’s something uncertain underneath, a tentative, careful note.

Steve stares at the two of them. It’s hard to tell in the dim light, but he thinks Jonathan might be blushing. “You mind if I put some pants on first?” he asks eventually.

Yeah, Jonathan is definitely blushing now, but his expression takes on a truculent cast, because like Nancy, he’s never met a challenge he didn’t like. “It’s your bedroom.”

“Jesus,” Steve mutters, running a hand through his hair. For a moment, he actually considers taking the implicit dare, dropping the towel and crawling into bed with them bare-ass naked...

But Jonathan is injured, and this thing, whatever the hell it is, can probably wait until all three of them are actually awake before they go introducing nudity to the equation. Assuming it doesn’t all turn out to be a fever dream in the morning, which he’s more than half expecting. He pulls his sweatpants up under the towel before unwrapping it and dropping it in a damp heap on the carpet. They’re both just watching him.

“So, uh,” he says, and shifts his weight on his feet.

This time, it’s Jonathan who reaches out to pull the blankets down.

“Come here,” he says quietly, authoritative despite the blush still staining his cheeks, and Steve goes. He slides under the covers, his knees bumping against Jonathan’s legs— the bed is big enough for three people, but only just barely. He doesn’t know what the hell to do with his hands.

“Relax, Steve,” Nancy says sleepily from Jonathan’s other side.

“*You* relax, Nance.”

“Both of you be quiet,” Jonathan says, and he turns onto his side, his back pressed to Steve’s chest and his hair tickling Steve’s nose.

Steve turns his head until he’s not practically eating hair, and finally lets his hand rest gingerly on Jonathan’s hip. He only realizes his mistake when Jonathan twitches under him, sucking in a pained breath through his teeth. He jerks his hand away. “Sorry, sorry—”

“It’s okay,” Jonathan says. He catches Steve’s hand in his, tangling their fingers together before Steve can think to pull away, and pulls until Steve’s hand is resting against the warm, flat expanse of his belly where his t-shirt is rucked up slightly. After a moment, he can feel Nancy’s smaller fingers brushing against their linked hands. She hums approvingly and leaves her hand there.

“Now sleep,” she says, on the edge of a yawn.

Steve kind of wants to argue, but Jonathan is warm against him, so loose-limbed that it’s like he’s melting into the mattress, and Nancy’s fingers are petting absently along his knuckles, and he actually is really fucking tired. What the hell. They can figure this, whatever *this* is, out in the morning.

He closes his eyes, tucks his face into the nape of Jonathan’s neck, breathes out, and lets go.

Author's Note:

I'm not even going to mention how many LOTR jokes
I deleted here.